

Price tags put on intermodal sites

Disputed Elkridge location given lowest cost estimate

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The most controversial of four proposed sites for a Baltimore-area center for transferring cargo between trucks and trains carries the lowest cost estimate, while one that has virtually no close neighbors would cost nearly twice as much, according to officials of CSX and the Maryland Department of Transportation.

But during a news briefing Tuesday at the agency's headquarters, the officials offered assurances that while all of the locations remain in the running, none is favored over the others.

"Cost is a driving factor, but it is not the only factor," said Christopher Smith, director of strategic initiatives for CSX.

The state and CSX officials were to hold the first of a series of workshops on the so-called intermodal project Tuesday night in Jessup. Other meetings are scheduled for Thursday in Elkridge and Monday in Beltsville. The sessions are the first department-sponsored briefings for the public since a series of events in the spring.

The intermodal project, whose cost estimates run from \$140 million to \$325 million at the various locations, is regarded as a cornerstone of Maryland's strategy for handling a future expansion of port traffic and making the Port of Baltimore more competitive in handling containerized cargo.

CSX and the state project the center will generate more than \$18 billion in direct and indirect economic activity and 6,700 jobs over 30 years.

CSX said it needs a site south of Baltimore, along its Camden Line, where trucks can bring containers to be double-stacked on trains and sent inland without having to go through the Howard Street Tunnel. The more than century-old tunnel through downtown Baltimore is too small to allow double-stacking — a limitation that has been a serious impediment for the port. The state and CSX hope to open the center in 2015.

But the intermodal project, a type of inland marine terminal, has sparked opposition in eastern Howard County, where two of the four proposed sites are located.

The two Howard sites under consideration are in Elkridge/Hanover and the Montevideo Road area off U.S. 1. The others are in Jessup in Anne Arundel County and in Beltsville in Prince George's County.

Of those, the one that has triggered the most vocal opposition has been the Elkridge/Hanover site, with 353 homes within a quarter-mile.

The Greater Elkridge Community Association — concerned about noise and traffic — has been mobilizing area residents to fight any move to locate the facility in their community. At the same time, the association has said it does not oppose the facility itself, and points out that the Jessup site — surrounded largely by warehouses and prisons — has virtually no homes within a quarter-mile.

New figures from CSX show there is at least one powerful incentive to locate the facility in Elkridge. The company put the estimated cost of the Elkridge/Hanover site at \$140 million to \$165 million and the Jessup site at \$300 million to \$325 million — the highest of the four. The cost of the Beltsville site was put at \$175 million to \$200 million and the Montevideo site at \$200 million to \$225 million.

According to those estimates, the Hanover site appears to be the only one likely to stay within the original \$150 million cost estimate — which CSX and the state had agreed to share 50-50.

Officials said each of the sites has advantages and disadvantages as they go through a rigorous process of analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The process is a drawn-out exercise that involves many federal, state and local agencies weighing factors such as residential impact, cost, environmental concerns and effects on historic and cultural sites.

Residents who go to the workshops hoping to find clues to the eventual location are likely to be frustrated. Officials at Tuesday's briefing remained studiously neutral about the choices under consideration. Residents who may be concerned about the future of their neighborhoods are unlikely to know the outcome before late next year, when a site choice is expected to be announced.

Dominic Wiker, project manager for the state Department of Transportation, said the final decision will be made by the lead federal agency, the Federal Highway Administration, based on a recommendation from the state. Typically the governor makes the final decision on the state's choice after receiving advice from the department, he said.

Transportation department spokesman Jack Cahalan said the federally required review process is "very challenging" to explain to the public. But he said virtually all major transportation projects in Maryland, including the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the Intercounty Connector, have gone through it.